

# BoOm<sup>watch</sup> [\(http://www.watchboom.com/\)](http://www.watchboom.com/)

The view on travel for boomers. Free. Monthly.  
By the best writers in the travel industry.

---

[Home \(http://www.watchboom.com/\)](http://www.watchboom.com/)

[Featured \(http://www.watchboom.com/articles/monkeys-yes-jaguars-maybe\)](http://www.watchboom.com/articles/monkeys-yes-jaguars-maybe)

[Archive \(http://www.watchboom.com/archive\)](http://www.watchboom.com/archive)

[Contact Us \(http://www.watchboom.com/contact-us\)](http://www.watchboom.com/contact-us)

**Sign up for a FREE monthly subscription to  
WatchBoom.**

Email:

[Subscribe](#)

---

## **MONKEYS YES, JAGUARS MAYBE**

*Story by Anne Z. Cooke and photos by Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld*

It was 6:01 a.m. in Turrialba, Costa Rica when we heard them barking, an insistent “huh-huh-huh-huh” floating through the rain forest canopy and over Pacuare Lodge.



*The luxurious Linda Vista Suites, high up in the rain forest canopy and with screened walls on three sides feels like being outdoors. Pacuare Lodge, Costa Rica.*

“Howler monkeys,” said Steve, squinting at his watch. Then a toucan weighed in, two long, raspy “screeches” close to our deck, in the Rio Pacuare Forest Reserve, in eastern Costa Rica’s Barbillá National Park.

Up in a flash, we grabbed the binoculars and dashed outside, where a chorus of honks, chirps and whistles ushered in the dawn.

“Shhhh! Steve said, hopefully, peering over the railing into the underbrush. “Listen! Was that a growl?”

Wildlife on parade is a predictable event at most Costa Rican eco-lodges. Coatis, Capuchin monkeys, birds and butterflies lead the early morning walk, followed by sloths, bacillus lizards (Jesus lizards because they “walk” on water) and green frogs. Howler monkeys, tapirs, armadillos and tarantulas bring up the rear. But big cats, ocelots and pumas? Once in a green moon.

“Jaguars? Maybe, but don’t count on it,” said Travel Planner Alison Carey, three months earlier when she called to talk about our trip. A Latin America specialist with Scott Dunn Personal Journeys, Carey and her colleagues research and book custom, personalized adventures for individual travelers.



*Like much in Costa Rica’s rain forest, the Pacuare Lodge’s “Canopy Adventures” zipline orientation starts up in a tree. Pacuare Lodge, Costa Rica.*

We'd been to Costa Rica before, but just briefly, on a cruise ship stop-over. This time would be different, we agreed. Hence the call to Scott Dunn Personal Journeys, a leader in the growing trend toward custom travel.

"You'll like Pacuare Lodge," said Carey. "It's on the river, an easy, four-mile raft ride downstream," she said. "It's known for wildlife, and wild cats, too, though they're rarely seen. It's isolated, but that's part of the appeal. You know what they say: Costa Rica is one of Central America's safest countries."

Was it? Sporadic upheavals have plagued Central America for decades, from corrupt governments and armed insurrections to civil wars and more recently, drug trafficking. Would Costa Rica be that different? We were willing to chance it.

Then our itinerary arrived in the mail, a spiral-bound notebook listing dates, places and our contacts at each, with blank space for notes. The last three nights would be on our own, joining well-heeled friends for a reunion at Villa Manzu, a palatial mansion on the Papagayo Peninsula.

But the question lingered.

"Is it true? Is Costa Rica Central America's safest country?" I asked Abel, the Scott Dunn driver who picked us up at the Juan Santamaria International Airport, in San Jose, the capital.

"We think so," he said, heading for the Finca Rosa Blanca hotel, north of the city. "It's because we have no military," he continued. "The money pays instead for schools, high school and college, and for health care and doctors. And it's all free," he said.

"Of course, there are always people who don't want to work and are tempted to steal. But most people here have jobs," he added as we reached the hotel, a restored, 14-suite Spanish Colonial house and coffee plantation, with a pool and a popular open-air restaurant.

On time for the day's coffee plantation tour, we expected to hear about sales and marketing. But the two-hour uphill walk with Naturalist Manolo Munoz was as much about sustainable farming as it was about a good cup of joe.

Stepping off the trail and among the coffee trees, planted in volcanic soil between banana and poro trees in a mixed-species forest, Munoz explained that "trees add important minerals" to the



*A half-hour's hike from Pacuare Lodge leads to a hidden waterfall.*

soil. “A mix of sun and shade grows better “cherries” (coffee beans) than the big commercial farms do,” he said.

That evening, as the sun slipped between the palm fronds and Miguel, the hotel waiter, came around with menus, I decided to see what he’d say. “Uh, Miguel, why do people say Costa Rica is Central America’s safest country?”

“Because we don’t have an army,” he said. “After the civil war, in 1949, the government decided that paying for education, hospitals, culture and parks was more important than guns and soldiers.”

Local police handle regional crime and a national government-supported 70-man team of “commandos,” a trained “security and intervention” group is available for extreme emergencies. But beyond that, no army.



*Hike through the grounds at Nayara Springs Resort and get lost in the landscaping, a green with tropical plants and flowers crowding every path, enhancing every pool and flanking every restaurant. Highlighted by fully grown trees, with bushes, flowers and even animals --large, strange birds and families of sloths – the botanical gardens are what make this luxurious, full-service resort so unique. Most plants are native species; all are identified by a common and scientific name. Nayara Springs Resort, Costa Rica.*

And the belief in education, health and environmental awareness seemed to be part of the daily fabric. No wildlife sighting went without an informed talk about Costa Rica’s species, and their adaptation to the country’s 12 climate zones, ranging from sea level to 12,533 feet, atop the volcano Cerro Chirripo.

Rafting through the Pacuare River's narrow gorge, paddling down river to Pacuare Lodge, our guide pointed out the differences between the trees along the river gorge and those on the mountain side above, typical howler monkey habitat.

And the lodge itself, alone on a bend of the river, was equally habitat-conscious. Self-sustaining (electricity is limited to several hours daily), it manages to be both rustic and luxurious. Candles light both floors of the lodge – the bar upstairs and the dining room and river-side deck downstairs, where the meals were served.

Most bungalows have several screened walls, a smart – and mosquito-free – way to bring the outside in. The oldest bungalows, built along the river, were recently remodeled. The luxury suites, each feeling like a treehouse, are terraced up the mountain.

Every day was busy with discovery hikes, wildlife prowls and visits to the indigenous village nearby. But we managed to fit in an plunge-pool dip and a nap in the hammock. At each candle-lit dinner, shared with other like-minded guests – the only sound was the river.

It was a startling contrast, indeed, to our next destination, Nayara Springs Resort, in central Costa Rica, on a paved road near Arenal Volcano National Park. Greeted by a uniformed bell boy, we thought we'd made a wrong turn.

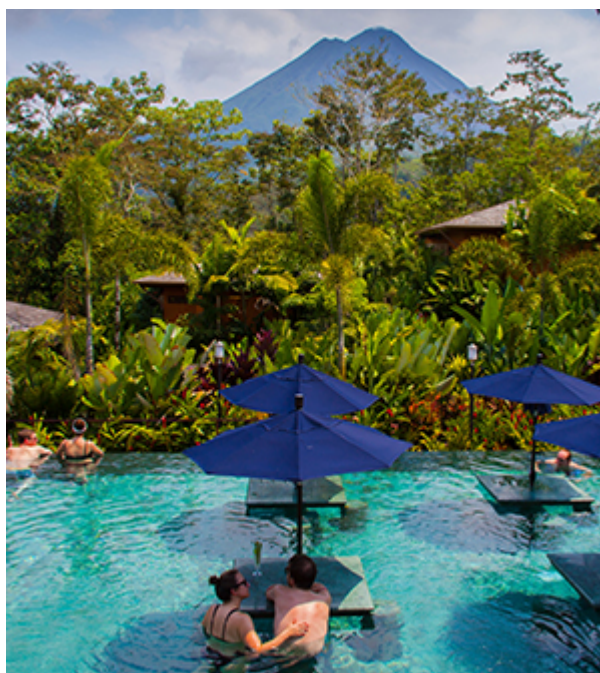
But this popular vacation and honeymoon village only masquerades as a sophisticated hotel. Despite its sumptuous suites – elegantly costumed and with its own plunge-pool – Nayara Springs' swimming pools, shaded patios, bars and pubs, a spa and gym, restaurants and shops, and even guided tours, are tucked away in a shady maze of serpentine paths, each hidden from the next.

A five minute walk beneath the trees – alive with resident birds and 30-odd sloths -- was a stroll in the woods. Two nights wasn't enough; we left planning to return.

As our Scott Dunn-planned trip ended, we said goodbye to our driver, Andreas, who dropped us off at our last destination. This was the Villa Manzu, a privately-owned two-story stone mansion on Costa



*This pool is one of four at Nayara Springs Resort. The resort ranked #1 Central American luxury resort in 2016 by Travel & Leisure magazine, has everything: lounge chairs, umbrellas, a swim-up bar, patio dining, in-pool dining, lush landscaping, and on the down-hill side, classic views of Arenal Volcano.*



*Nayara Springs Resort, near Arenal Volcano National Park, is centrally located for hiking, zip-lining, spelunking and mud bath treatments. Nayara Springs Resort, Costa Rica*

Rica's northwest coast, flanked by grassy lawns and trees, pools and patios.

This luxurious hideaway, with rooms for up to 22 guests, runs with a staff of 12, including a butler and three chefs. Located on five shaded acres at the end of the road, overlooking the ocean, it guarantees privacy for those with deep pockets: celebrities, tech-company millionaires, movie moguls, industry titans and sports greats. We were lucky to have generous friends among them.

Because this will be your vacation retreat – for the duration -- everything's included. This means meals, wine, cocktails, snacks, sports equipment, fishing gear, a car, guides, and as always, Costa Rican hospitality.

#### TRIP TIPS TO REMEMBER:



*River runners rafting to Pacuare Lodge encounter easy Class 2 rapids getting there; and when they leave, heart-pounding class 4 and 5 rapids downstream. Pacuare Lodge, Costa Rica.*

Scott Dunn Personal Journeys, a leader in the newest trend in travel, researches, plans and books personalized vacations and adventures to world-wide destinations. Contact them at [www.scottdunn.com](http://www.scottdunn.com) (<http://www.scottdunn.com>).

#### THE LODGES:

Finca Rosa Blanca: double rooms start at \$254 per night; [www.fincarosablanca.com/en](http://www.fincarosablanca.com/en) (<http://www.fincarosablanca.com/en>)

Pacuare Lodge: all-inclusive rates for three nights, for two in a bungalow start at \$766; look for discounts. [www.pacuarelodge.com](http://www.pacuarelodge.com) (<http://www.pacuarelodge.com>).

Nayara Springs Resort: bungalows for two start at \$351; look for discounts. [www.nayarasprings.com](http://www.nayarasprings.com) (<http://www.nayarasprings.com>).

Villa Manzu: the all-inclusive rate for the entire house is priced per night. Multiple guests, groups or families can share the cost. Call for dates, availability and current prices. [www.villamanzu.com](http://www.villamanzu.com) (<http://www.villamanzu.com>).

GOING THERE: Fly into Juan Santamaria International Airport, in San Jose. For Villa Manzu, in Guanacaste Province, fly into Liberia Airport. The chauffeur does pickups.

My bio: Anne Z. Cooke writes about travel and its effect on global warming. Contact her at [travelswithanne@cs.com](mailto:travelswithanne@cs.com) (<mailto:travelswithanne@cs.com>); or Twitter at [@anneontheroad](https://twitter.com/anneontheroad).

©The Syndicator 2018, Anne Z. Cooke.

---

Featured (<http://www.watchboom.com/articles/monkeys-yes-jaguars-maybe>) | Archive  
(<http://www.watchboom.com/archive>) | Contact Us (<http://www.watchboom.com/contact-us>)

Copyright © 2018 Unleaded Group. [Website design and development by Unleaded Group \(http://www.unleadedsoftware.com/\)](http://www.unleadedsoftware.com/)